

BULLETIN boards have always primarily been the preserve of the hobbyist, one man operations run by lone enthusiasts. The users logging on tend just to be fellow enthusiasts. Above all, the sysop is an amateur pursuing a spare-time interest.

The formation of a new company, however, may change all that, and usher in a new era. The company, MusicTel, represents a new force with new ideas, and a new professional approach that could make bulletin boards serious contenders for a slice of the commercial telecommunications market.

There's no doubt that micro communications got off to a slow start. It took the inevitable disillusionment with playing Space Invaders to draw micro owners to telecommunications – a case of either putting the computer on the top shelf and forgetting it, or finding a new use (and how many home users write letters in sufficient quantities to warrant serious word processing or have enough data to maintain a DB?).

The last year or so then, has seen a substantial growth in the number of subscribers to both Prestel and Telecom Gold, coupled with the mushrooming of competing electronic mailing systems. We have witnessed the arrival of the first Prestel format bulletin boards and await the launch of a new system by the breakaway Prestel IP, Timeframe International.

It seems clear the market has picked up. The interest is there, so are the potential subscribers, and consequently the opportunities are there. Could a small company operating a network of bulletin boards find itself an innovative and profitable niche in the growing telecoms market? If so, MusicTel might be the one.

Like many successful business ventures, MusicTel is the result of a series of odd coincidences and some opportune timing. What turns these ingredients into good business, of course, is always the presiding genius of the entrepreneur who harnesses them to his own purpose.

Enter James Eckhardt, a 15-year-old schoolboy, who runs

Bulletin boards are growing up

By Richard Poynder

MusicTel from his North London home. A few weeks ago I visited James to find out more.

About 18 months ago, he bought himself a modem and tried out the local bulletin boards. One of the first boards he logged on to happened to be the London Bulletin Board, as it was only the cost of a local phone call away.

In fact James noticed that the first three digits of the board's number were the same as his own; the sysop spotted his interest and broke in to chat to him. It turned out they lived two streets away from each other.

As a consequence of this and subsequent chats James was offered a section on the London Bulletin Board. A little later he was in touch with many of the pioneering figures of the bulletin board world. One of his early contacts was Marcus Anselm, who was at that time writing the FBBS bulletin board software. James suggested he test the software for Marcus. Marcus agreed. Soon James was running his own board, MusicTel.

Initially this was just a small operation with some 20 menus and one download. Seven months later, in September 1986, James was given a 1.6 Mb disc drive, allowing him to expand to 50 downloads. Before long he was getting 30 callers a day.

Why MusicTel? James has always had an interest in music, and plays several instruments. The usual names chosen for bulletin boards he found singularly uninspiring: "BBS this. BBS that". James grimaces when questioned about it.

MusicTel suited James' interests and avoided the usual unimaginative initials. The next step was to find some music files to go with the

name of the board. In particular he wanted music files written by the Micro Kid, a very popular anonymous software writer. Not only that, he wanted the Micro Kid, who was at that time writing for MBBS Mitcham, working with him.

After weeks of fruitless efforts to track down the Micro Kid, James, on the point of giving up, was startled to notice him logging on to the board one night. He quickly paged him and suggested he leave MBBS Mitcham and run a section on MusicTel. The Micro Kid accepted immediately. What's more, he agreed to let James have exclusive rights to all his future music files.

What are these music files? Primarily they seem to be programs that play the themes from such popular television series as Dallas, the A-Team and Coronation Street. What's important, they are very popular.

James' instinct regarding music files and the Micro Kid proved spot on. MusicTel's subsequent success stems from the nature of these music files, not so much the number of them, but the quality. Before long files downloaded from MusicTel were turning up all around the country, and as they all had MusicTel written into the program, and the number of the board, people were soon phoning from all parts of the UK to sample more music.

The name of MusicTel spread. Again, as a result of the quality of this software and in a bid to get regular access to it, James Lawson approached MusicTel with a view to setting up a board in Hull, which became MusicTel 2. Later MusicTel was approached by William Holmes, who has now set up MusicTel Plus. And so it continued. Now MusicTel comprises a network of five bulletin boards stretching from

DOWNLOADS

- 1. Island Logic Downloads**
- 2. Music 500/0 Downloads** ««««
- 3. Micro Kid Downloads**
- 4. Slobb Downloads**
- 5. Music (VARIOUS authors)**
- 6. Games and Util Downloads**

Main Menu

Upload (Please contribute)
MUSICTEL 500

Screen designed by D. Zargel
RICHARD, Please enter selection

Liverpool to Thanet, and new ones are joining all the time. In all 25 people are involved in running the network.

Access rates for each board vary between 30 to 40 callers a day during the week and 120 over the weekend. With plans to open a board in Egypt, MusicTel hopes soon to go international. Already there are links with the French Teletel system and the American Source.

In addition to the music files, the boards tend to have a variety of musical special interest groups (SIGS), ranging in taste from pop to classical. The boards have much in common, but also have their own specialities.

MusicTel 500 earns its name by specialising in the Music 500 add-on for the BBC, and has downloads that require the add-on in order to run. It also caters for the Music 5000 upgrade.

MusicTel 4 provides files of digitised speech. MusicTel Plus has ambitious plans for the provision of an on-line Mode 7 graphics 3D maze, and is shortly due to open a What's On Radio and TV section, plus, perhaps, a theatre section, the aim being to attract a family audience. There are also plans for a possible multi-user development.

The boards cater mainly for the BBC Micro. At present the files are only for BBC users. Plans are under way, however, to provide files for other computers – initially the Commodore, with others later.

It could be argued that none of this makes MusicTel so very dif-

ferent from any other bulletin board. Even the networking is as yet limited in scope. But what is special about it perhaps is the vision and the ambitions of James Eckhardt.

One idea is to sell advertising, which it is hoped will overcome the major obstacle to operating a bulletin board, the financial constraints. For £50 a company can buy a week's advertising on the whole network. For £100 a tele-shopping service is available, with callers being able to buy advertised goods by credit card while on-line. James claims also to be able to put the company's advertisement up on the Teletel system and to mailbox it to subscribers on The Source.

There are also plans to provide an area on Micronet. This will include the novelty of on-line music. Users will be able to download free comms software from Micronet, go to the MusicTel

area and, by means of this downloaded software, listen to music while on-line. The area should be opening soon and James expects it to be very popular. Talks are also in progress with Database Publications with a view to providing a section on MicroLink.

So can we expect MusicTel to grow and grow? Certainly James has all the energy and enthusiasm required. He seems to have the business sense – and he does appear to have winning ideas. Practically every day he is contacted by sysops around the country wishing to join the MusicTel team.

Having developed from a hobby, there remain some traces of informality to MusicTel. There is at the moment no formal contract between James and the other MusicTel sysops, although he acknowledges the necessity of

ADVENTURES

2. XANADU

3. TOP LEVEL MENU^o

RICHARD, Please enter selection

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drawing one up, and is currently in the process of doing so.

Similarly the method of supplying advertising on The Source and Teletel has an aura of the amateur about it, but it's early days as yet, and James is learning as he goes along.

It should be pointed out that he does not see himself simply as an entrepreneur. What motivates James, and what has made MusicTel thus far successful, is a keen interest in telecommunications. However he has a realistic awareness that it is an expensive hobby that can be made to pay for itself, and perhaps provide a future occupation. Thus at the heart of MusicTel's development lies James' awareness both of the need to provide what his audience wants, and the necessity of creating a self-financing business around this.

As James himself expresses it: "What differentiates MusicTel from the ordinary bulletin board is the excellence of the downloads we provide and the networking system. Our boards have a good geographical spread, allowing many people to access the system at low cost and the consequent high number of callers makes the advertising more attractive to companies.

"The more advertising income we have, the more we can expand the system – and thus allow more users cheap rate access."

It does make sense. However, it should be remembered that this is not networking as one might understand it. In essence, it is a series of boards around the country carrying the same name and the same software, plus the same adverts with some individual touches, as mentioned above. The boards are not connected up in any electronic sense. Electronic mail, for instance, cannot pass between the different boards.

However, soon to be established is a new bulletin board only for MusicTel sysops' use. This will allow the network to be coordinated and ensure that software and advertisements are correctly and promptly passed around the system.

DOWNLOAD GAMES

UTILISE

1. HANGMAN
2. MAZE CHASE
3. HARRIER
4. SNAKE CHASE
5. SPACE INVADRS
6. CASTLE QUEST ED
7. MONITOR TEST
8. SOUND CREATOR
9. YOSSA
- A. MAIN DLOAD MENU

RICHARD, Please enter selection

For me, the essence of the challenge MusicTel faces – as do all bulletin boards and similar systems – is the trauma of growing up: of realising that in order for the micro communications revolution to properly develop, bulletin boards, and even large Prestel IPs like Micronet, have to find the money in order to grow further.

And in order to earn this money they have to attract a larger audience than the computer buff market, which is only so big, probably already nearly saturated and, in any case, too incestuous and self-regarding to develop much further.

The challenge is to develop micro communications into a healthy medium. Not an end in itself, but, like television or radio, merely a tool for communication. Was it not the case that the first radio sets to arrive in the home were kits supplied for the enthusiast? Now the radio is an essential part of the furniture.

The aim should be to make the modem as indispensable as the radio. Whether this happens depends, I would maintain, on the services that can be provided by means of it.

Will the sysop one day be as popular as the disc jockey? It might be that MusicTel won't pass the

MICRO KID

1. AIRWOLF
2. BORDERLINE
3. CHEERS
4. DON'T WASTE MY TIME
5. DALLAS
6. IN THE MOOD
7. JAZZ
8. STREET HAWK
9. WOMBLES
- A. THE A TEAM

RICHARD, Please enter selection

FEATURES

- (1) Beebugsoft Information
- (2) List of other Bulletin Boards
- (3) Computer News (Updated Monthly)
- (4) Fan Club (New section!)
- (5) Software Reviews (Updated Monthly)
- (6) System Information
- (7) Top Ten Games (Updated Monthly)
- (8) Top Ten Singles (Updated Weekly)
- Main Menu

RICHARD, Please enter selection

test; it might be that the enthusiastic spirit will ignore business sense; but if it isn't James Eckhardt then it will probably be someone else, for the time is right.

The decision of Timeframe International to leave Prestel and set up its own system is part of the same challenge that MusicTel is addressing. Timeframe felt it had the choice of staying and stultifying or trail-blazing. Bulletin boards have the choice of retaining the amateur status of CB radio, or of seriously confronting the telecommunications challenge.

Of course it could be argued that there's no imperative reason why MusicTel shouldn't opt to retain amateur status, but I'd like to think they'll be more adventurous.

And wouldn't it be running true to form if a company run by a 15 year-old led the way!

The MusicTel boards are available on the following numbers:

Board	Number	Sysop	Location	BBS
MusicTel HQ	01-455-0843	James Eckhardt	London	FBBS
MusicTel2	0482-653755	James Lawson	Hull	FBBS
MusicTel4	0695-421493	Guy Oldhams	Liverpool	NBBS
MusicTel500	01-458-9704	Malcolm Carter	London	NBBS
MusicTel Plus	0843-590000	William Holmes	Thanet	NBBS

MusicTel Egypt is hoped to be opening soon. James can be contacted on MusicTel HQ, Prestel (Mailbox 014550843), Telecom Gold (MAG 11144), and the Source (BDH 387). Enquiries about advertising should be made through MusicTel Publicity on 01-881-6311.